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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 005832

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SUBJECT: FORMER PREMIER ANAND: COUP FORESTALLED VIOLENCE

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) The September 19 coup d'etat forestalled an imminent violent confrontation between enemies and loyalists of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, according to former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun. In a September 21 meeting with the Ambassador, Anand related that Thaksin had already steered Thailand away from democratic governance and deprived the people of mechanisms to remove him from office peacefully. Anand regretted the manner in which the Council for Democratic Reform under the Monarchy (CDRM) abolished the 1997 Constitution, but he observed that Thailand could benefit from constitutional reforms, especially the creation of a new type of Senate. He recommended the USG press for the dissolution of the CDRM after the installation of a civilian Prime Minister. Anand also expressed cautious optimism that conditions in southern Thailand might improve. End Summary.

FACTORS LEADING UP TO THE COUP

2. (C) In a September 21 meeting with the Ambassador, Anand Panyarachun, who twice served as appointed Prime Minister in the early 1990's, claimed the September 19 coup d'etat forestalled imminent political violence between Thaksin's enemies and loyalists. (Note: The People's Alliance for Democracy, which earlier this year organized large anti-Thaksin demonstrations, had called for a major rally on September 20 to persuade Thaksin to resign. Thaksin's allies publicly condemned the plan and rumors arose of an impending crackdown on protesters by security forces. End Note.)

3. (C) Anand said he could not have advocated a coup, but it was important to recognize that Thaksin's administration had already become undemocratic. Thaksin had controlled the media, suppressed the free flow of information, and manipulated an uninformed electorate. He had corrupted the judiciary, to the point that court cases against him could not proceed. He had sabotaged the Constitution, manipulating political institutions that were supposed to be independent, destroying the system of checks and balances set up by the 1997 Constitution. Thaksin's administration lacked accountability and transparency. In this environment, elections by themselves hardly ensured democracy. Thaksin blocked off all avenues for political change, leaving his opponents no option other than a coup.

4. (C) Thaksin further aggravated the Thai people by appearing to put himself on the same level as the King.

Anand stopped short of characterizing Thaksin as disloyal to the King, but he said Thaksin failed to understand how many people came to perceive him as hostile to the monarchy. Thaksin had brought trouble upon himself by picking fights with Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda, Anand noted.

CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

15. (C) The Ambassador asked Anand's views on constitutional reform. (Note: Anand chaired the drafting committee for the 1997 Constitution. End Note.) Anand expressed regret that the CDRM had abolished the Constitution rather than simply suspending it, but he hoped the CDRM or its successor civilian government would still use the 1997 document as a starting point. Anand acknowledged problems in the 1997 Constitution, and he advocated abolishing the Senate as a non-partisan elected body. (The current Senate, although elected by the people, became highly partisan, contrary to the intention embodied in the Constitution.) A better alternative would be a House of Lords model, with the Senate consisting perhaps at least in part of former high-ranking officials, appointed in a transparent, systematic process. Anand also noted one could not hope to abolish money politics completely, but it would be important to ensure checks and balances more effective than those provided by the 1997 Constitution.

16. (C) Citing his own experience as a Prime Minister appointed by the National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC -- the junta which overthrew Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan in 1991), Anand lamented that the NPKC had continued to exercise power behind the scenes during his first administration. Now, he took note of CDRM leader General Sonthi

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Boonyaratglin's pledge to appoint a civilian government within two weeks. Anand urged the USG to press Sonthi to follow through on this commitment.

CONDITIONS IN THE SOUTH

17. (C) The Ambassador asked whether Anand felt conditions in southern Thailand might improve now that Thaksin was out of the scene. (Note: Many contacts considered restoring order to southern Thailand difficult if not impossible so long as Thaksin remained as Prime Minister. End Note.) Anand, who served as Chairman of the National Reconciliation Commission, expressed cautious optimism, saying he liked how Sonthi viewed situation in the South. A good first step would be the release of some 59 people still detained in connection with a clash between security forces and Muslim protesters at Tak Bai in October 2004, Anand suggested.

COMMENT

18. (C) As one of Thailand's most distinguished elder statesmen, Anand made waves in August when he publicly denounced Thailand's course under Thaksin. Anand presented himself as lacking foreknowledge of the September 19 coup but feeling generally sympathetic to the CDRM and understanding of its motives. Given Anand's experience as a Prime Minister who was appointed by a coup-instigating junta and then worked to restore democracy to Thailand, the ease with which he accepts the CDRM's claim of noble intentions is noteworthy. Interesting and not surprising was Anand's disparaging reference to Thaksin's manipulation of the "uninformed" electorate. This elitist point of view -- shared by many wealthy and educated Thais, especially in Bangkok -- gets to the heart of Thaksin's claim about revolutionizing Thai politics, precisely by taking on these entrenched elites.

BOYCE